

**United States House of Representatives
Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Social Security**

**Statement for the Record
Modernizing Social Security's Information Technology Infrastructure**

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Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Becerra and Members of the Subcommittee, my name is Rick Warsinskey. I am the President of the National Council of Social Security Management Associations (NCSSMA). I am also the District Manager of the Social Security office in Downtown Cleveland, Ohio. I have been in this office for twenty-one years, and I have worked for the Social Security Administration for over forty years.

NCSSMA is a membership organization of approximately 3,200 Social Security Administration (SSA) managers and supervisors who provide leadership in more than 1,230 field offices and teleservice centers throughout the country. We are the frontline service providers for SSA in communities throughout the nation. We are also the federal employees with whom many of your staff members work with to resolve issues for your constituents who receive Social Security retirement, survivors or disability benefits, or Supplemental Security Income. Since our organization's founding, over forty-six years ago, NCSSMA has been a strong advocate of prompt and efficient locally delivered services nationwide to meet the various needs of beneficiaries, claimants, and the general public. One of NCSSMA's top priorities is a strong and stable Social Security Administration; one that delivers quality and prompt community based service to the people we serve, your constituents. We also believe we need to be good stewards of the taxpayers' moneys.

Our association also helps coordinate the activities of the SSA Advocacy Group. This group of over 30 organizations works to improve SSA's services at all levels. Members include senior citizen organizations and disability support groups from across the country, SSA and Disability Determination Services associations, federal management associations and employee unions.

We are very appreciative of the support the Committee on Ways and Means has provided SSA for so many years. Your leadership in recognizing the challenges and critical needs confronting SSA has resulted in vital support to our agency and allowed us to adequately serve the American public.

Our testimony will focus on the current challenges we are experiencing with our computer systems in SSA offices throughout the country.

If you visited any Social Security office in our nation today, whether it be a field office,

teleservice center, program service center, hearing office or even headquarters, you would hear one common and overriding complaint - our computer systems are slow and problematic.

Last summer, when NCSSMA surveyed our members, we found, that on average, we were losing about 15 minutes per employee per day because of computer issues and slowness. In a more recent survey we completed this past May, the estimated lost time increased to 20 minutes per employee per day. We believe this costs the agency upwards of \$200 million per year in lost employee productivity.

Every day, SSA employees wait and watch as their computers crawl from one system's window to another. Users watch the spinning wheel move as programs and screens attempt to load, losing valuable time that could be used to assist other customers or address workload backlogs. Around noon Eastern Time every day our system reaches peak capacity and the slowness becomes most apparent, as almost all the offices in the country are open to the public and taking claims, talking to the public on the telephone, or handling some aspect of a claimant's record.

We can demonstrate the degradation of SSA computer speed in real numbers. We surveyed our offices and found that data speed tests showed these median Megabits per Second (Mbps) speeds:

Download: 2.87 Mbps
Upload: .25 Mbps

A year ago when we surveyed the same measurements, the median speeds were:

Download: 3.45 Mbps
Upload: 2.0 Mbps

This degradation in data speeds supports the nearly universal feedback we are receiving that our system is slowing down significantly. It is important to note the data speeds you can typically expect to receive from cable internet service providers are now over 50 Mbps for download and 10 Mbps for upload speed.

One key solution to addressing our slow system is increasing the bandwidth at SSA. This would apply to every point through which our traffic runs: from the field office computer; through their servers; to the lines running out of the office; to the regional servers and to our data centers at SSA's headquarters.

As frustrating as the problems with our slow system are, our employees are also experiencing many other issues with our system every single day. Our computers often freeze or applications become inaccessible and require a reboot. It can take 10 minutes to restart a computer and get back online. We are often unable to run live video training or engage in video communications with the public due to lack of bandwidth.

Once we open more than five programs on our computers, they often freeze, requiring us to reboot the system. Internet access and our e-mail communications are also excruciatingly slow.

Our online time and attendance system (WebTA), which is the system used to pay employees, periodically freezes and is often down on the day we certify payroll for employees. Additional time is spent on the telephone waiting to talk to our internal help desk to resolve computer issues that we are experiencing. The need to call the help desk will only increase as SSA expands telework and calls to resolve access issues increase.

The following is sample feedback from our survey:

It is very time consuming and frustrating to run into issues where the remedy is to reboot your system - this does takes many minutes out of the day's operations, when not planned, and wastes time for clients and staff.

The main system issue that we experience is with the laptops freezing up. They frequently freeze or will not open web-based programs, and the only way to fix it is to reboot the computer. This frequently happens at least once a day, but can often be up to 3-4 times a day. Each time, it costs valuable time that they could be using to process work just to wait for the reboot and log on process again. I would estimate that we waste up to 15 minutes a day per employee due to this issue.

Before taking this survey, I had to restart my computer due to system slowness and connectivity issues. This is something that happens to me regularly during the week.

Our system has consistently gotten worse. It takes forever to read your card when you unlock the computer. Outlook takes much longer to open up in the morning than previously. Opening programs from the regional Intranet page takes a long time. It takes a long time for the Intranet page to open.

Multiple employees each day must restart their workstations. Everyone is frustrated.

We have regular Outlook e-mail slowness and freezing throughout the day. Intranet and Internet sites freeze up on a regular basis. Several users have to restart their laptops multiple times a day so the Internet, Intranet, Personal Communication System (PCOM), and other systems will work properly. These restarts can take 10-15 minutes and lots of productivity is lost during these times, especially when in the middle of an interview.

We have constant systems issues. Our computers run extremely slow all of the time. We have consistent connectivity issues, issues with applications, and laptop failures. Our systems continue to be a bloody mess that prevents us from operating at our full potential.

The system is very slow most days and seems to be getting slower each week.

The system is incredibly slow and often leads to necessary restarts...which take lots of time.

The slowness is a daily event -- especially on the East Coast at about noontime when the rest of the country is coming on.

Internet Explorer constantly locks up for everyone in the office every day. That is equivalent to about 4 hours of lost productivity every day for my office because they have to restart their computers. We also have issues with Outlook being really slow when sending emails. It's only about a 30-second delay most of the time when this happens, but over a week or month it starts to add up. We generally receive several reports from employees each week that Online Retrieval System Notices (ORS) or Claims File Record Management System (CFRMS) is going really slow. Sometimes it takes more than 1-2 minutes just to open a document. The transition from COBOL Modernized Supplemental Security Income Claims System (MSSICS) screens to web-based MSSICS screens is another area that needs improvement. This process gets bogged down sometimes. Nearly every pay period we have slowness and access issues with WebTA. We also have monthly problems with Treasury Check Information System (TCIS) at the beginning of the month. It just seems like so many of our problems could be resolved by increasing our download and upload speeds.

Some days it feels like I sit and wait while the computer decides to complete a task I need done. Daily there are employees who contact me about Internet Explorer (IE) - either they can't get in to the Electronic Disability Collection System (EDCS) or some site because it is a white screen with a circling ball or IE crashes. I can only recommend that they restart. This wastes so much time and is not foolproof. This will allow users to get in to the website they need. But after a few hours, they have the same trouble. Other web programs we use react the same way. It just spins with "non-responding" in the menu bar. Most of us do not have enough time in the day to wait for the system to decide to work.

Outlook has been terrible for several months. It takes a very long time to open up and even longer to open my calendar. I have compressed my Outlook, archived old items and it does not seem to help. WebTA is typically slow on days that require verification or certification.

Our efficiencies and productivity are not only dependent on reliable systems access, but also on efficient programs. SSA programs are becoming more complex and we are experiencing more bugs in them. Upgrades to our system have been problematic and sometimes cause additional issues, which adversely affect public service. For example, our Representative Payee System (eRPS) was recently upgraded. Since this upgrade, we have experienced numerous issues and problems with the new eRPS system. We literally have hundreds of stuck cases, and have had to develop many work arounds to process cases and to make changes to the representative payees. In many situations, it has been necessary to issue manual payments. There have been numerous fixes to address these systems problems and many more are planned. This program is extremely complex, but there was no pilot testing of the program before it was released.

The eRPS program interfaces with a number of COBOL-based programs that have extremely intricate coding and rules to run the programs. Our two largest programs, Modernized Claims System (MCS) for the Title II program and Modernized Supplemental Security Income Claims System (MSSICS) for the Title XVI program, which were first written over two decades ago, are cumbersome and outdated programs that are very difficult to train staff on. Because of necessary changes and fixes to these programs, today they are extremely complex with mixed coded screens built on top of screens. There is an age limit to keeping these programs operating

effectively and there is a very strong need to rewrite the programs using an agile process with databases that can be updated in real time.

The following example helps to illustrate problems with SSA systems. When you want to change your address for your Google contacts, it is done instantly across all platforms, whether you access your contacts on a desktop, laptop, iPad or smart phone. However, when SSA wants to update an address, it must be input separately into each system, and then run overnight, sequentially, to affect the actual record. This is not efficient and is an outdated process that needs to be remedied.

Going forward, what can SSA do to resolve systems access issues so users can perform their jobs efficiently? From our perspective there are four areas that need to be addressed: bandwidth, web-based applications, laptop hardware and software.

First, the most cost effective issue to address is the bandwidth problem. NCSSMA suggests that a pilot be conducted to increase the bandwidth 10 times over our current rates to assess if this provides relief. If this is successful, then the bandwidth speed across all of SSA should be increased.

Second, the web-based applications need to be improved—WebTA, Visitor Intake Process (VIPr), MSSICS web-based screens, and Electronic Disability Collect System (EDCS). Perhaps when they were developed, bandwidth consumption was not appropriately considered. Is there a way to make these applications more bandwidth efficient?

Third, SSA needs more robust laptops and docking stations, or as an alternative, software modifications that alleviate slowness and docking/undocking problems.

Fourth, laptops need to be updated immediately from a 32-bit operating system to a 64-bit operating system.

NCSSMA strongly supports resources for modernizing SSA's code and rewriting its programs. SSA needs new systems architecture and cannot continue to keep patching its problematic and antiquated systems.

We understand modernizing SSA's computer systems will be costly and take time. However, failure to address this critical concern is delaying the inevitable. The cost to remedy the problem will only increase if it is delayed. In the meantime, severe disruptions of service will intensify as the system degrades further and the problems continue to get worse.

Our agency touches every American and we maintain billions of records and pay out nearly a trillion dollars a year. We need to ensure that these payments are made accurately and tax dollars are not unnecessarily wasted on an inefficient and problematic system that cannot keep up with the essential services our agency provides.

We are extremely concerned that the funding available for SSA through the annual appropriations process will not be sufficient to address the agency's needs. As increased

demands are placed on the agency's aging systems and IT infrastructure, services will continue to degrade with claims processing delays and increased workload backlogs. The funding level recently proposed by the House Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee may force SSA to consider some extremely difficult decisions. Our testimony demonstrates the real need for additional resources to address SSA's systems issues.

The resources to address these IT infrastructure needs will be difficult to provide. SSA currently has record high hearings backlogs. Over 1.121 million people are waiting for a hearing decision. The number of disability hearing cases pending has now increased 37 out of the past 38 months. The average age of a hearing case is 327 days, and of more concern is that the average processing time is a record setting 566 days. As a result, our most vulnerable citizens are faced with the possibility of homelessness or severe health deterioration without the means to pay for health care.

SSA's program service centers also have a near record backlog of over 2.8 million cases pending, with the average age of a case over four months. The program service centers are responsible for processing workloads that usually require manual processing due to limitations in SSA's system software, which is yet another reason to address modernization and resources for systems.

Examples of backlogged workloads in the program service centers are:

- Medicare issues such as Part B reinstatements, premium payments and income related monthly adjustment amounts (IRMAA);
- Workman's compensation and government pension offsets;
- Windfall offsets;
- Overpayment collections;
- Check remittances;
- Recalculations of monthly payments due based on work (AERO) and other check adjustments;
- Underpayment actions;
- "Return to Work" reports for disability beneficiaries;
- Payment of attorney fees;
- Critical check payments;
- Garnishments;
- Non-medical reconsiderations; and
- Resumption of benefits that have been suspended due to payee or address changes.

These centers were scheduled to hire staff this summer, but a near agency wide hiring freeze was imposed at the end of May due to concerns about the Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 budget. We will likely see an increase in improper payments, as additional benefit actions are delayed and backlogs grow further. The delays will also increase follow-up contacts to field offices and the National 800 Number, which are already an issue.

The level of funding proposed by the House Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee could also lead to one to two weeks of furloughs for SSA employees and severely restricted overtime. Field offices may see a reduction in the number of hours they are open to meet with the public and available to answer incoming telephone calls. Wait times and answer rates in field offices could reach record levels. In addition, there will likely be severe deterioration in the busy rates for our National 800 Number. Finally, the likelihood of the need to close some field offices will resurface as SSA will be challenged to cover the costs of these offices.

SSA needs to have adequate funding to support the agency and its systems. We recognize that budget dollars are tight. We strongly believe some kind of dedicated funding for modernization of SSA's information technology infrastructure is necessary to ensure the agency can run efficiently and effectively without disruptions of its services. The chances of such a disruption will increase the longer we wait to address these issues.

On behalf of the members of NCSSMA, I thank you again for the opportunity to submit this written testimony to the Subcommittee. NCSSMA members are not only dedicated SSA employees, but they are also personally committed to the mission of the agency and to providing the best service possible to your constituents. We respectfully ask that you consider our comments, and would appreciate any assistance you can provide in ensuring the American public receives the necessary service that it deserves from the Social Security Administration.